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Best Practices and Trade Secrets:
How to Recruit and Retain Quality Staff

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Best Practices and Trade Secrets: How to Recruit and Retain Quality Staff

*A forum organized by the State of Vermont
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Overview

Recruiting and retaining qualified workers is challenging for policy makers, providers and consumers of long term support services. The Vermont Department of Aging and Disabilities and the Division of Developmental Services organized a forum to explore best practices in Vermont. Over 140 policymakers, provider agencies, workers and advocates attended the forum. The forum was conducted under the state's Real Choice Systems Change Grant from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Partial support for the forum was provided by the Rutgers Center For State Health Policy/National Academy for State Health Policy Technical Assistance Collaborative.

The agenda included a national overview of long term care workforce issues for states by Robyn Stone, Executive Director of the Institute for the Future of Aging Services; presentations by Renee Pietrangeno, Executive Director of ANCHOR, a national organization of providers serving people with developmental disabilities; John McCarter, author and human resources consultant; and Barbara Frank and Rebecca Crosby Hutchinson of the Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute.

Participants also heard from four caregivers and a panel of provider agencies on best practices in their organizations. After the presentations, participants joined eight breakout groups to discuss their experiences and to make recommendations.

Presentation summaries

Robyn Stone, Institute for the Future of Aging Services

Stone identified several characteristics of the workforce challenge: labor shortages, high turnover and vacancy rates, movement within the health and long term care industry, increased demand, and concern about the future pool of workers. Factors affecting the worker shortage include the perceived value of caregiving, public policy design, labor and welfare policy, and immigration policy.

States have undertaken initiatives to improve recruitment and retention in six areas: improving wages and benefits; forming task forces or work groups; efforts to provide career ladder options; efforts to broaden the pool of potential workers; public education, awareness and recognition; and training programs.

Steps to improve wages and benefits cover wage pass throughs; increased reimbursement rates; shift differentials; providing access to health insurance; and linking reimbursement increases to improved staff performance.

In addition to state initiatives, providers themselves are undertaking initiatives to recruit and retain workers. Examples were cited of provider recruitment practices that include: better training, peer support and mentoring, career advancement opportunities, management and supervisory training, efforts to change organizational culture, and enhancement of wages and benefits package. Stone concluded that addressing the workforce shortage requires multiple strategies, better data collection, and evaluation of the range of state efforts.

Renee Pietrangelo, ANCHOR

Forty five percent of all workers who leave do so in the first six months of employment and 23% leave between 6 and 12 months. Caregivers who stay 12 or more months learned about the job from another caregiver or source within the agency. Turnover drops when workers are involved in support plan meetings. The three top problems identified by workers who left were: relationships with co-workers, relationships with supervisors, and wages.

Strategies that work:

- Develop a recruitment consortium with other agencies that employ direct care workers.
- Offer paid internships.
- Offer day care or transportation vouchers.
- Treat recruitment pro-actively, not as filling vacancies.
- Recruit through a set of shared values.
- Examine the characteristics of high performers and translate it to a recruitment strategy.
- Identify aspects of the agency that make it unique and address expectations of the person being interviewed.
- Ask people what they liked or did not like about the interviewing process.

John McCarter, Human Resources Consultant

- Recruitment is a sales function. Emphasize the values of the organizations and the service delivered.
- Start with a clear statement of values that is communicated to the employees and the community at large.
- Undertake outreach activities such as speaking to civic organizations that are always looking for speakers at their regular meetings.
- Create roles for volunteers who then talk about the agency and the mission to others.
- Keep reminding workers about the mission after orientation is complete.
- Write notes to employees when they do something well. Place the notes in the personnel file.
- Training is modeling. Always show the attitude that workers need.
- Form good relationships with community colleges, local high schools, technical schools and clergy.
- Be clear whom you do not want to retain. Tolerating poor performance undermines other workers.

Representatives of the Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute emphasized the importance of giving prospective workers a clear understanding of the work and the tasks they will be performing. Providers were advised to ask staff what it was like when they began work and design orientation and training around their experience. Mentoring is a good tool to support workers early in their job experience. One staff nurse became “a resident” in order to appreciate what it was like to receive care and how staff might be trained to better respond to consumer dignity, independence and autonomy. Strategies that were implemented in a Massachusetts program included a wage pass through, offering a GED, providing free training, offering English as a Second Language courses, and creating a career ladder.

Barbara Frank noted that the culture of long term care has changed but more change is needed. Restraints were once seen as an acceptable practice to improve safety. Further changes are needed to increase the role of the consumer. One important step is to make consumers and direct caregivers part of the team.

Break Out Group Recommendations

Participants were assigned to eight groups, including one for caregivers.

Expert caregiver group

- Create a universal nursing department employing cross training.
- Foster teamwork, clear communication, more shadowing, matching staff with residents, hands on training, rather than by textbook.
- Offer financial incentives for further education, amount of hours worked.
- Include aides as part of the interviewing process, and ask why the person wants to be a caregiver?
- Use LNA’s more actively in the education and promotion of how rewarding care giving is, including contact with the media.

- Identify a person who will be the liaison for each shift to create a good working environment and to recognize the concerns of caregivers.
- LNA's should be more involved in decision making as members of a team. Treat work as a natural family for the residents and their families to make the experience gratifying.

Recommendations from other groups

Recruitment

- Explore the possibility of a joint media campaign with other programs that may assist in finding people that want to work in this field.
- Create a central clearinghouse where interested potential staff may post requests for more information about the field of caregiving.
- Use the Reach Up model for recruiting caregivers. Better communication for all staff. Get rid of the "Us" and "Them" attitudes.
- Find the right person for the job by screening potential applicants and interview based on attitudes and energy. Use current staff to help determine a profile of the ideal candidate and assist with interviewing process. Know who you are interviewing and prepare for the interview. All staff should be involved in developing a standardized tool for interviewing potential caregivers.
- Involve all staff in the interviewing process, especially the LNA's who will be working with the individual.
- Maintain a truthful representation of the type of work. Address the realistic job tasks and be clear about job expectations.
- Develop a clear values statement.
- Expand workforce by looking to high schools and colleges.
- Achieve a higher profile in the community as a recruiting tool.
- Create work study programs and programs that allow credit for on the job training.
- Examine policy changes that might facilitate bringing young people into facilities to learn first hand what the work is like.
- Send newsletters to community leaders and become a member of the Chamber of Commerce.
- Create wellness programs for staff members such as free pedometers and have contests with teams competing for a prize.

Retention

- Build social capital by partnering with other businesses and local community vendors to arrange discounts for caregivers such as fitness club discounts and phone discounts.
- Create a quality enhancement team to "problem solve" issues that affect staff. The teams would include a representative from all departments.
- Create an employee advisory committee
- Create "enjoy your job," "theme days;" make it fun to go to work, "fish philosophy." Offer praise for your peers!
- Create equality between LNA's and RN's.

- Provide on-site daycare for caregivers' children.
- Find out why people leave.
- Stagger orientation follow-up.
- Talk to the employee weekly during the first month.
- Develop a management model that does not ask staff to do what you wouldn't do yourself. Nurses should help out more.
- Establish a slush fund for staff members, loans for employees.
- Organize job site educational programs annually to help LNA's who want to further their education.
- Put up a "white board" with any instructions or information daily to avoid the "no one told me" syndrome.
- Retain staff by requiring team building exercises and diversity training so staff learns how to forgive and accept change and different personality styles.
- Offer a career ladder so each staff person has a goal and can be given more responsibility.
- Value and respect EVERY employee regardless of level of education or amount of responsibility.
- Trust is important on caregiver's part, foster teamwork, with the managers and supervisors. Address perception as reality.

Communication

- Communication is the most important part of successful retention. Teach management how to communicate. Use a caregivers' newsletter to publish needs and current events of staff.
- Establish an open door policy for staff to discuss concerns and recommendations.
- Schedule monthly time with management. Encourage supervisors to look to staff for feedback. Ask for help.
- Hold monthly staff meetings and include minutes of the meeting in paychecks so absent members know what happened.
- Make sure human resource managers spend time in the facility.
- Allow for self-evaluation and meetings for staff with supervisors.